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It is rare to find scholars who differ on important issues being able to open-mindedly explore and critique each other’s perspective. This can be especially difficult when one scholar has spent many years devoted to developing a methodological framework attempting to sample aspects of human consciousness. In such cases, we would typically expect to find critique and defense without either side being familiar with the actual issues involved, let alone fostering a respectful appreciation of opposing arguments.

Russell Hurlburt is a psychologist who has developed a sampling and interview procedure used to describe phenomenal consciousness (See Hurlburt, 1997; Hurlburt & Heavey, 2006). With nearly 30 years of work exploring such an approach, he feels he has a procedure that overcomes the problems of early introspectionist approaches and shows promise in addressing the vexing problems of studying human consciousness. He met philosopher Eric Schwitzgebel in 2002 at a conference where each were presenting opposite views regarding the potential of such introspective methods. Schwitzgebel maintains a more skeptical view regarding the value of introspective access (e.g., Schwitzgebel, 2007). Hurlburt invited Schwitzgebel to participate in “descriptive experience sampling” where a beeper is used to select experiential moments which are then recorded by the participant and later explored in a dialogal interview format with the researcher. Later, a more neutral participant, named “Melanie” was recruited by both to record her moments of experience which were then expanded via the interviewing method. While the interviews are led by Hurlburt, Schwitzgebel is also able to question Melanie. These interviews are then explored in frank exchanges between the two authors.

The present book is the result of this collaborative effort to explore the DES method and the issues it raises regarding the use of introspection to learn about conscious experience. The book begins with an account of their meeting and introductory chapters by each author. After their positions are presented, there follows six chapters, one for each sampling day, where Melanie’s reports in response to the random beeps is examined, and issues are raised by each of the authors regarding the accuracy of what is being described. The book ends with each presenting their view regarding the merits and limitations of the method, and again, presenting their (relatively unchanged) positions concerning introspective access to phenomenal experience.

Briefly, Hurlburt feels his approach overcomes some of the limitations of typical introspectionist approaches because he does not require the participant to take on a specialized, third-person view analyzing their own experience, he samples
randomly and does not select himself what experiences to examine, and he has the participant record their sampled experience immediately with the follow-up expository interviews conducted within 24 hours. In the interview process he attempts not to impose a structural account, but rather aims to bracket his preconceptions while also helping the participant avoid natural tendencies to present a packaged “meaningful” account, or to explain. His aim is to describe just the sensory, perceptual, and cognitive aspects of the moment faithfully. While aware of the problems that participants face in recording their experiences, and the further challenge of biases during the interview process, Hurlburt feels his method holds promise as a way to accurately describe basic features of immediate experience. He particularly feels it is an improvement over the early introspection methods of Titchener and current “armchair” reflections of philosophers and others where problems of memory and theoretical (non-experiential) preconceptions are allowed free reign. He welcomes efforts to validate his method, but feels such criteria need themselves to be based on experientially grounded description.

Schwitzgebel shares an interest in introspective methods, but argues that such efforts have fundamental challenges that are not likely to be overcome. As such, most methods may have some limited success in garnering information that might be veridical, but their value would need to be verified by independent (non-experiential) behavioral, physiological, and cognitive studies. At the end, he agrees that Hurlburt’s DES procedure may be used to describe some basic features of experience, but not offer the kinds of answers to bigger questions of structure and function that is of most interest to him. In addition, he does not see the DES procedure to have shown itself distinctively more accurate and less error-prone than most other “armchair” or self-reflective efforts. Despite Hurlburt’s efforts at bracketing and trying not to influence the participant’s account, Schwitzgebel felt social pressure was still too influential at times.

Both he and Hurlburt feel that a science of consciousness requires a better descriptive account of phenomenal experience. Schwitzgebel feels that immediate experience is too fleeting and ephemeral, that people are not naturally capable of much accurate description of immediate experience, that the introspective turn itself alters and motivates biased construction rather than description, and that situational and research pressures must also promote an interpretive creation rather than a faithfully descriptive account.

Both authors agree that the DES method may arrive at some accurate accounts of what was experienced in general, but feel the details of particular experiential reports should be looked upon more skeptically. They also agree about the pitfalls and challenges of introspective methods but Hurlburt feels the DES has overcome many earlier problems and shows promise, while Schwitzgebel feels there remains a likelihood of bias and pressure in the interview process.